

## Traits as (Social) Resources

In this presentation I will discuss a new way of thinking about traits – one that I hope will be helpful to managers and leaders in understanding their employees/followers – particularly in understanding how they react to change. This research is grounded in the Big Five Theory of personality, which groups personality traits into five major factors: conscientiousness, emotional stability, extraversion, agreeableness, and openness to experience (Goldberg, 1993; McCrae & Costa, 2003).

I propose that we should think about traits as resources that we have available to use – resources that can be leveraged to accomplish goals. For example, if we were to think of extraversion as a well, some people have very deep wells – lots of extraversion, which can be used in virtually any situation. Someone with a deep extraversion well will be liberal in using that trait to accomplish goals. Someone with a shallow extraversion well will need to be more strategic in using that resource; only allocating it to situations that really demand the use of extraversion.

Over time, we come to depend on our deeper wells. We learn how to apply our most plentiful resources to a range of situations. For example, imagine someone has a fast-approaching deadline and they still have a great deal of work to do. The individual with the deep conscientiousness well would likely put the extra time and work in to complete the project by the deadline, even if that decision came at a personal cost (such as lost sleep). However, the highly extraverted individual might instead go talk to the person to assigned the project and try to persuade that person to extend the deadline, or give the project to someone else, or assign an additional person to the project to provide help. We depend on our deep wells to benefit us

across a wide range of situations, and we become more adept at using that resource as we apply it to various situations in our lives.

This suggests that for managers and leaders, we don't really need to think about a complete constellation of traits for our employees/followers to understand them (that is, we don't need to know their scores on all of the Big Five). We only need to know what their one or two strongest personality factors are, because these will likely influence their behavior more than the other factors. From a research perspective, this also suggests that relationships between traits and behavior may be stronger at higher levels of traits – a proposition that could be tested using quantile correlations (Choi & Shin, 2018; Li, Li, & Tsai, 2015).

This perspective – traits as resources – can also be helpful to understanding why person-job fit is important. When we work in a job that matches our trait resources, we are able to draw down from our deep wells without worrying that those resources will be totally expended. If the job requires us to use shallower wells, they will be used up before the day is done, leaving us feeling, quite literally, spent. This understanding can help managers and leaders make decisions about which individuals to assign to various projects, based on their strongest personality traits.

I also propose that it is helpful to think of traits as *social* resources. We tend to think of the Big Five as having positive vs. negative poles. High conscientiousness is positive, while low conscientiousness is negative. However, it would be more useful to think of them as having a pole that represents traits that are useful to individual survival, vs. traits that are useful for thriving in social situations. Because we live in a world that is increasingly interconnected and interdependent, we have come to view social traits as good, and individualistic traits as bad. In reality, they are just different – some are better for the individual, and some are better for functioning within a group.

This is most easily seen with introversion vs. extraversion: being an introvert is more helpful to individual survival, while being an extravert is more helpful for functioning effectively in groups. It is also relevant to the other Big Five traits. For example, in a dangerous world, being distrustful (low agreeableness) is helpful to individual survival. However, in a situation in which a group bands together to protect one another from the dangers of the world, trusting one another and working together (high agreeableness) facilitates the success of the group.

Conservation of resources theory (Halbesleben, Neveu, Paustian-Underdahl, & Westman, 2014; Hobfoll, 1989) proposes that when an individual is tired or stressed, s/he will conserve resources. If traits are social resources, then when we are tired or stressed we should become more focused on individual survival, and conserve our social resources, moving toward the more individualist end of the pole and more individualistic behavior. Someone who is normally highly conscientious may neglect their responsibilities; someone who is highly agreeable may become more self-centered. This understanding can be particularly important when leading change efforts in organizations – those efforts are inherently a source of stress. As such, employees may tend to move toward more individualistic behaviors in response to change. Emphasizing the benefits of the change, and emphasizing the importance of collective action, may help mitigate this behavior.

In conclusion, thinking of traits as (social) resources can help managers and leaders to better understand their followers, make better choices about whom to assign to projects based on their trait resources, and to better manage employees and followers while leading change efforts in their organizations.

## References

- Choi, J-E., & Shin, D.W. (2018). Quantile correlation coefficient: a new tail dependence measure. <https://arxiv.org/abs/1803.06200>.
- Goldberg, L. R. (1993). The structure of phenotypic personality traits. *American psychologist*, 48(1): 26-34.
- Hobfoll, S.E. (1989). Conservation of resources: A new attempt at conceptualizing stress. *American Psychologist*, 44, 513-524.
- Li, G., Li, Y., & Tsai, C-L. (2015). Quantile Correlations and Quantile Autoregressive Modeling. *Journal of the American Statistical Association*, 110, 246-261.
- McCrae, R.R., & Costa, P.T.Jr. (2003). *Personality in Adulthood: A Five-Factor Theory Perspective*. New York: Guilford Press.